Major disasters that typically hit Southeast Asia illustrate the immensity of the tasks involved in undertaking disaster relief operations. With the establishment of the ASEAN Community by the end of 2015, it is crucial to institutionalise regional response plans that support and synergise the governments’ national disaster response mechanisms and facilitate international responses in the region.

Regional cooperation on humanitarian assistance

The Hyogo Declaration and the Hyogo Framework for Action stressed the need to strengthen and develop regional mechanisms to ensure rapid and effective disaster response in situations that exceed national coping capacities. As such, with the increased frequency of natural disasters, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) was fully ratified by all member-states in 2009. It is a legally binding agreement that promotes regional cooperation in intensifying joint emergency response, among others. The Agreement established the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) to facilitate cooperation and coordination among member-states, and with relevant U.N. and international organisations. A pool of trained and rapidly deployable experts on emergency assessment, the Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT) has been established. ASEAN, since 2005, has been regularly conducting the ASEAN Disaster Emergency Response Simulation Exercises (ARDEX) to simulate and practice disaster response situations, and review information sharing, search and rescue coordination, and disaster emergency response.

Capacity gaps

ASEAN’s disaster response mechanism faced its first major test in 2008 when Cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar. ASEAN, with support from partners, demonstrated that it can provide an effective coordinating mechanism to facilitate the delivery of international assistance. In 2013, in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, the AHA Centre deployed its team members and the ASEAN–ERAT in Manila and Tacloban City to coordinate with the Philippine government to provide international relief support for the victims.

But ASEAN had received criticisms that its role in relief efforts was limited to basic information-sharing functions, without substantial logistics and funds, while international aid was spearheaded by the U.S and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), among other actors.

However, it should be pointed out that it is not ASEAN’s aim to supplant international humanitarian actors. Despite the existence of these regional mechanisms and institutions, the primary responsibility of responding to disaster-hit areas still lies with the national government as the first responder.
Strengthening regional capacity

In order to further enhance ASEAN’s response mechanism through a network of specialised services, Singapore established the Changi Regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Coordination Centre, which seeks to contribute to more effective multinational military responses to disasters, by enhancing operational coordination among military responders. The Disaster Emergency Logistic System for ASEAN was set up in Subang, Malaysia to ensure a quick availability of emergency relief items that can be accessed by member-states in the aftermath of major disasters.

There are also other ASEAN-initiated multilateral ad-hoc exercises in disaster management. The ADMM-Plus HADR/Military Medicine Exercise and the ARF Disaster Relief Exercise (ARF DiREx) gather military assets and emergency teams from ASEAN members and dialogue partners, conducting table-top exercises and joint drills on the evacuation of casualties, humanitarian civil-military coordination, and delivery of aid to affected communities.

ASEAN has come a long way in building its regional disaster response capacity. However, while regional capacity has increased since AADMER was ratified, many programmes are still in their early stages. For ASEAN to become a capable and recognised primary humanitarian actor in the region, it will need to expand, requiring greater financial and resource commitment by its members. Though regional efforts are being institutionalised, attention also needs to be focused on improving capacity at the national level. ASEAN member-states need to rethink and improve their own national strategies for disaster management and humanitarian assistance.

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